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**HEADLINE:** A helping hand from Saudi Arabia

**BYLINE:** By Richard Z. Chesnoff; Robin Knight

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**HIGHLIGHT:**

Who funds Hamas?;

**BODY:**

From a spacious headquarters in a warehouse near Jidda Port, the International Islamic Relief Organization coordinates a multimillion-dollar campaign to fund communal and social work among refugees and the poor throughout Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

But according to Western intelligence sources, the relief organization does much more than that: They believe that the IIRO, one of the largest nongovernmental organizations in Saudi Arabia, is a major clearinghouse for an estimated \$ 20 million a year in Saudi financial aid to Islamic extremists in Gaza and the West Bank. It's all a high-risk gamble for the kingdom. Allowing the raising of money for foreign groups that support religious extremism and terror, say these intelligence sources, could spark even greater dissent against the Saudi government.

Dangerous liaisons. Much of the aid sent to the West Bank and Gaza, report these sources, is given as unsupervised cash grants. The funds are first transferred to London and Amman bank accounts of Islamic welfare organizations such as the Palestine and Lebanon Relief Fund (PLRF) and the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund (Interpal). At least some of that money, say the sources, winds up financing Hamas activities, from funding the families of suicide bombers to bankrolling the suicide units.

Farid Y. Gurashi, the general secretary of the IIRO, denies that his organization sends support to any political group, "even if it's a good cause." But, adds the American-educated Gurashi, "it would be silly and unacceptable to say we cannot help Palestinians."

According to a copy of a document obtained by U.S. News, officials of a Hamas fund-raising group in the West Bank and Gaza were instructed to send letters of thanks to the executives of the IIRO and another Saudi organization, the World Association of Muslim Youth, for "charity for this year."

A spokesman for Interpal in London denies either group has any ties to Hamas. And, after a three-month investigation, the British Charity Commission declared it could find "no deliberate transfer of funds to Hamas." But David Rich, head of the BCC's Investigation Unit, says that "considering where the money goes, it is conceivable some of it reaches Hamas supporters."

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Government officials in Riyadh insist that while Saudi businessmen and worshipers may have made private gifts to Hamas and other Palestinian extremist groups, the Saudi government never provided direct aid to Hamas. But Riyadh diplomats say that such donations by businessmen are often officially sanctioned--and even "suggested."

**GRAPHIC:** Picture, A pro-Hamas demonstration in Gaza. And letters of thanks for "charity for this year" (Ahmed Jadallah--Reuter)

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